

The Dissolving View

BY MAY HARRIS

TO find, after a period of mixture with the world of outside things, that the place of one's early belonging is unchanged—unflexed from its abiding characteristics, and remote to one's advance—affects different people in the measure of their temperament. To Angela Westray it was less a revelation than a disappointment, as, pathetically alone, she struggled with a March wind in her walk from the station to her old home.

Her life there, before her seven years of absence, had lacked intimacy with her surroundings, and, indeed, had been detached from many of the personal sympathies that belong naturally to youth. People in Madderley had spoken of the Westrays as eccentric, and the chance word clung descriptively even when the family had narrowed suddenly to Angela and her older sister, Margaret. When their father and mother died, Margaret left Madderley to go on the stage, and took Angela with her.

Her brilliant success, her wonderful charm, and her beauty came back in paragraphed echoes to Madderley, but she herself never returned. Her death in London less than a year before, at the close of a gratifying season in a successful play written especially for her, gave the younger sister the option of decision, and tentatively she came back. It was almost the first effort she had ever individually made, and it was a wrench to disassociate herself from the life she had shared with her sister. And yet, while she had been so closely related to it, she had nevertheless been so far outside as to be a little lonely. All her personality had been dormant for so long that she had no clear impression of herself apart from her sister, who had directed and carried forward not only her own life, but Angela's as well.

That all this past, with its triumphs and its glamour, had belonged to her sister, and with her death had come to a

close, Angela, out of step with its brilliant fellowship, completely recognized.

Notwithstanding her attitude of withdrawal, her reserve, she had been acutely dependent upon it. Even Margaret's friends, whom she had not perfectly approved, she wistfully remembered, and wished she could have numbered one as hers. She had been definitely outside.

"She's my other self—my puritan self," Margaret had gayly declared once. "I'm relatively pagan."

The jesting words came back in the train of Angela's thought as she unlatched the gate and went up the straight path to the door of her old home. She felt a surge of refutation as she faced the bare realism of positive puritanism in the house—grim, bleak of outline, like the impersonal stare of a stranger where one had hoped to meet a friendly face.

Angela had written to the woman who, since her absence, had lived there as caretaker, and who answered the hesitating knock on the door.

"I'm Angela Westray, Miss Nancy." Angela met her dubious gaze.

Miss Nancy Pemberton, of a rigid New England type—unsubdued after thirty years in Madderley,—made a movement of her head too stiff to be described as a bow.

"Be you?" she said.

Angela put out her hand. "Surely you remember me, Miss Nancy!" Her fresh voice echoed in the cavernous hall. "It has only been seven years!"

"No, you ben't changed." Miss Nancy trusted her passive fingers a second to Angela's clasp. "Older," she added, as she drew them away.

The chill of that first evening, when Angela watched the fire kindled on the so long deserted hearth of the sitting-room, was of a desolation the succeeding days repeated. The unlovely stiffness of the furniture, the cold silence of the rooms, numbed her.

The people of Madderley called. After the manner of their different kinds they hastened to welcome her, and Angela had her vision enlarged to appreciations of the conscious elegance, the warm-hearted kindness, and the casual provincial curiosity so fully to be met in village life. She recognized that she was just a little alien to them all.

With the utmost kindness of intention, they had their critical attitude, and Mrs. Probyn suggested the composite feeling, perhaps, when she told her daughter she was disappointed.

"It is not that we expected so much of Angela Westray," Mrs. Probyn added, as she pulled her chiffon neck-gear more closely about her throat and turned the pony's head down the street, "as it is that she simply doesn't impress one in the least! She was a quiet, stupid sort of girl, I remember, when she went away. She's come back just the same."

"She hasn't any style," Flo Probyn said, in her negative voice.

The Offinghams called early, and were very kind, but not penetrative to any need on Angela's part. They were relatively newcomers themselves, Mr. Offingham having become rector of the Episcopal church on the death of Dr. Grange a year or two before.

"It must be very pleasant for you—this return to your old home." Mrs. Offingham had filled a pause.

"I haven't been able to feel that it is 'home' yet," she confessed, and she could feel Mrs. Offingham's interest a little less in sympathy, as a qualifying touch to her polite acquiescence.

"It takes some time to adjust one's self."

It continued to take time. As the spring progressed, the gradual unfolding of the leaves changed the bare trees to things of beauty, and the unfriendly outlines of the Westray house became masked by the revived foliage of the Virginia creeper. The front had only grass and trees, but in the back yard Miss Nancy had planted sweet peas, and the lilacs that every place in Madderley possessed were purple and white with plentiful blooms. Miss Nancy Pemberton was never idle, but she was never sociable. She raised chickens, weeded her flowers, sewed, and ruled the servant Angela in-

sisted on having, with the vigor of her native New England. She was sixty-three, but she seemed made of steel, and her duties were accomplished with precision. As might be imagined, her speech was always to the point, and its cold directness was an arrow on the string for the gentle and perhaps aimless multitude of words indulged in by her more relaxed neighbors. Mrs. Probyn, also a Northern woman, was, at least superficially, an apostate to the manner of the people; but Miss Nancy had suffered no abridgment to her native prejudices from softening climatic influences.

Miss Nancy showed no interest in the changes Angela made in the house and its furniture. The grand piano was one of them, and Angela's music became a dominant presence. Miss Nancy's duties were carried on to the sound of fugitively caressing airs and echoes, of tonal harmonies exquisitely rendered; but apparently they passed her by without arousing interest or sweetening her literal acceptance of life.

Angela was the reverse of literal. One of her sister's friends had told her once that she pursued shadowy suggestions rather than definite possibilities.

His words came back to her, with his mocking smile that had seemed to provocatively discount so many of her conclusions, one day when she saw his name in a New York paper in the list of the passengers of an incoming steamer. There was a brief paragraph she found in the same paper and read eagerly:

"Anthony Guest and his mother, who arrived on the *Cedric*, leave in a few days for a visit to their old home in the South. Mr. Guest has completed his new play, which, it is understood, will be produced simultaneously in London and New York."

A touch of color came into Angela's face, and she sat holding the paper a long time with absent eyes.

At dinner she asked Miss Nancy a question: "Do you remember the Guests—Mrs. Guest and her son?"

"Yes. They come every five or six years and stay a spell. Their house is on the corner."

Angela perfectly remembered the house—square, and of red brick with white facings at doors and windows, and

an air of gloom lent definitely by the cedar-trees about it. She had never known it more than exteriorly in her previous life there. The intimacy—indeed the acquaintance—with the Guests had been formed abroad, and in connection with her sister's professional life. The Guests had not, however, entered the professional phase, except through artistic appreciation and Anthony Guest's achievement as a playwright.

Mrs. Guest was a woman of cyclopedic inclinations, and she touched tentatively many hobbies that always just failed of being permanent. The one thing she permanently kept was youth, which she did not pursue. She was, as Angela recalled her, the ideal woman of fifty—translucent to the emotions that would have been with most women nervously absorbed. The afternoon of the day Angela read of their arrival she unpacked for the first time a large portrait of her sister. It had been painted by Boldoni, and it presented, when the light struck the features, the transitional grace of a subtle moment fixed superbly as a translated phase.

The old negro man who did the unpacking stepped back, when he had hung it under her direction, with rolled eyes.

"It sholy am fine, Miss Angy! Yes, m'am, it sholy am!"

When Miss Nancy was called to see it, she stood a moment with the impartial detachment of her gaze on the vivid, strongly sensitized beauty that insistently held the eyes.

"You don't favor her," she said, in impassive comment.

To Angela's mind, the room in the following days came to be dominated by the almost veritable presence of the dead woman, and the domination compellingly allured. The influence made itself felt in her music—she played the things her sister had cared for—gay dance music, music with laughter, with the vivid human note that rang its refutation to gloom and unexplored things—brilliant, mocking, and fascinating in every rhythm.

She began to do her hair like the portrait, and singularly a likeness seemed established that had never been noticeable before. The beauty of the portrait was pervasive, infectious; and in the al-

most tangible efflorescence of a posthumous personality Angela's own seemed definitely closing, like a night-blooming flower at the approach of day. Her fragrances, so to say, were supremely of the twilight, and they began slowly to be intangible in the splendid glamour of the stronger radiance. She found herself searching in her memory for little hints of the past—bits that would help in the effect she wished—the stage-setting.

The resolute restriction of herself that had always been a characteristic trait was of a value—if differently—in the transformation. But something more magical seemed directly responsible—the strong impetus that could sway a woman out of the old channels, and could be the guide and goal and ultimate reward, was the hand on the strings that caught the alien note and compelled its response.

She put out of sight the old convictions, and shut her ears to their haunting echo as she tried to recast her image in the mirror. "If I can make myself like Margaret—" she met her abasement of recognition. "If he will think me like!"

Anthony Guest went to call on Angela the day after he and his mother arrived in Madderley.

Madderley had a heritage of returns. Those who had once belonged invariably came back, and the Guests were merely tardy claimants of the privileges and criticisms that were holdings of their citizenship. Mrs. Guest had never cared greatly for Madderley. She had come there to live, on her marriage, fresh from a larger environment and different traditions. While her husband lived she had managed to affiliate without the complete response a provincial neighborhood demands. She had a large fortune in her own right, and on her husband's death had left Madderley, only occasionally revisiting it.

She had met Anthony's proposal that they return to Madderley for the summer, with the amused tolerance she kept in reserve for her son's vagaries and which had proved an effective method of preserving unstrained the sympathy of their bond of relationship. He was restless, and his choice of a place for a holiday was merely consequent, she considered, to the fact that he had exhausted so many



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places of the interest of first impressions, that the definite drop to commonplace limitations would be in the nature of a relief. She was capable of the allowance that her own freedom from such a desire was because she so little exhausted her resources and so perfectly conserved her interests that her banked fires always permitted her to draw a chair to their comfortable warmth. Her convictions were of the agreeable kind that did not interfere with her many enthusiasms—enthusiasms developed so frequently by hazard that her intellectual bohemianism acquired varied flavors. She was very direct in her material divagations, and her son had always been conscious of the strength of her vivid personality, which had made an atmosphere provocative of genius, or at least of the talent he had successfully shown. This talent had made his name conspicuous as a writer of problem plays, and his temperament and her own were so similar as to permit the complete fellowship on her part with his interests that maternal possessiveness so frequently destroys.

Mrs. Guest, in effect, always comprehended parenthetically, and her parentheses were in a cipher she did not think necessary to translate to others.

One of her parenthetical ideas had been that if Margaret Westray had lived, her son would have eventually married her. It would not have disturbed her, for she was not, as has been explained, of the maternal temperament that exacts, and her son's freedom of inclination never dragged at an anchor of intolerance on her part. She had, in fact, admired Margaret Westray exceedingly, and had offered by this admiration a tacit encouragement of her son's taste.

But his attitude had never progressed in Miss Westray's direction to the definitive point his mother had premised. Indeed, it had been difficult now and then for her to decide whether he had ever intended it should; but she had the feeling that it would have come about. Margaret Westray's brilliance and daring had exactly met the need of her son's brilliant and daring work for an interpreter; she had seemed so perfectly in sympathy with the rôles he created as to suggest their having been written for her. It was not difficult for Mrs. Guest to re-

call that Angela was in every way different from her sister, and in the same measure from herself. She had met Margaret on equal ground; but Angela, never. She had seemed to Mrs. Guest not so much shy as grave, and of a baffling reserve she never broke—at least for Mrs. Guest.

Mrs. Guest recalled her son's jesting talk of the "little sphinx," as he had called her, with a smile—that ended in a sigh.

"She's just the same, I suppose," she said, on Anthony's return.

He looked up quickly. "Should you have thought she wouldn't be? That's just it,—she's changed—utterly!"

"Changed?"

"Like Margaret."

"But *how*?" Mrs. Guest appealed.

"Just that—like Margaret." And as his mother continued to be expectant: "You remember they were different types—in every way. Well, she's as much her sister as if her personality had shifted. There was a portrait of Margaret in the room—she might have been the prototype."

"But she—herself—" Mrs. Guest confidently advanced.

He shook his head impatiently. "It was when she began to talk that I felt it most. It wasn't that she talked of Margaret, you understand; she *was* Margaret herself!"

Mrs. Guest gave it up. "It's too curious—!"

"Well—I suppose it is. You'd think Angela Westray was gone, and Margaret's ghost in possession."

"Her 'ghost'?"

"Well, naturally, she isn't Margaret!"

"Oh, I see! It's superficial!"

"Superficial—?" he penetrated slowly. "How do you know it isn't a release? That the other wasn't the superficial thing?"

"Why—she'd been the other so much longer! A personality is a life! You can't shuffle."

"It's a difficulty she's surmounted."

"Well—it must be much more interesting."

"To other people, you mean? I think not—it's like a pose."

"Oh!"—Mrs. Guest was impatient with his dulness,—“I mean to herself!”

"But she was more satisfactory to herself when she *was* herself."



ANGELA MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE PROTOTYPE OF MARGARET'S PORTRAIT

"How do you know?"

"I divined it," he asserted.

"Dear boy!"—Mrs. Guest put this aside,—“don't bother with problems off paper. And of all people, Angela Westray—!”

"Yes—she didn't use to be a problem; she was as simple to the eye as a bit of crystal."

"As a crystal beside a diamond—yes," his mother agreed.

"Would you put it that way?" he reflected. "Perhaps you're right, mother. Crystal is a native state and a diamond's a product—pure carbon!"

"Well, the product's the jewel. It's what we all look for! Look at Angela! As long as she was a negative crystal you didn't notice."

"Didn't I?" he put forward an uncertainty.

"Of course not! She was like the tables and chairs, when Margaret was by!"

"Did you think of her that way?"

"I can't recall," Mrs. Guest puzzled, "that I ever thought of her at all! She wasn't in the least degree obvious."

"No," he agreed, promptly, "she wasn't."

That Angela was now perfectly obvious Mrs. Guest gathered more obliquely from her son than she did from Angela herself. There were suggestions of Margaret apparent, but, to her idea, of a sort that belonged merely to surface things—her dress, the arrangement of her hair—perhaps a word or a phrase that her sister had frequently used. Beyond this, Mrs. Guest's scrutiny, keen as it was, could detect no explicit obligation to another and so different personality. She decided that her son's impression was the reflex of a sentiment of memory.

"Anthony thinks you have grown so like Margaret," she commented to Angela, with a discretionary frankness.

To her surprise, Angela's face grew suddenly white.

"There's a likeness, perhaps—always."

"But we didn't notice it when— I remember Margaret used to say you were her opposite."

Angela did not ask if Mrs. Guest had agreed to this. Her old reserve was in evidence sufficiently to Mrs. Guest to suggest that her son's view was a mere

theory—built, perhaps, on the attraction of the old sentiment. She had the detached reflection that with him, as with all men, such things were a palimpsest of record and of a more facile appeal when it was possible for the type to be the same. Anthony was Anthony, of course, but, more than that, he was of the race of man.

He continued, to his mother's amusement, to comment on Angela and to find in this possible change a positive problem. The note of disappointment she perceived in his analysis was simply the inevitable contrast which she considered Margaret's splendid dominance would always discount. She had the thought that he was troubled because she was not so completely a revival of Margaret as the likeness suggested.

It certainly, as their stay in Madderley progressed into the summer, assumed very little proportion as an affair of the heart. Mrs. Guest's annotations at second hand were scarcely of a greater vagueness, apparently, than Anthony's. She could even indulge in marginal decorations of a delicate irony, to the slow development of the situation, and they, though so completely for herself alone, gave an *accès* to the interest of her very leisurely days, and, in her own phrase, secured her mental machinery from rust.

The cousin who was visiting England and who had very gladly taken their London apartment during their absence, wrote to ask if Anthony were writing another play, and Mrs. Guest had a euphemistic pleasure in answering, "He's analyzing a subject and planning a *dénouement*, but the development is, so far, more suggestive than intentional."

"You don't know how exceedingly you recall your sister," Anthony Guest said. He was sitting near the piano, and Angela was playing Brahms. The brilliant, rippling notes showered their accent, but she said nothing. In the next room Miss Nancy was taking accurate stitches in the hem of a table-cloth. Her acute sharpness of feature, seen through the open door, offered in its firm definiteness a resolute negation to the irresponsible lightness of the music.

"I wonder if you *do* know," Guest

suddenly persisted. Her hands wavered and a strong color swept into her face under his steady gaze. She looked up at the portrait—instinct almost to insolence with vivid life—and her fleeting glance returned to him.

"Not *like*," she amended; "an imitation!" Her tone puzzled him.

Some one rang the door-bell. It was the Presbyterian minister come to call on Miss Nancy. She closed the door between the two rooms, and Angela stopped playing.

"Perhaps it would disturb them," she explained, as she left the piano and sat down opposite, almost under the picture of her sister. Instantly to his thought recurred—in the grace of her attitude, her pose—the consciousness that she might at that moment have been, to his alert and, in a way, repulsed sense, the interpreter, as her sister had been, of his heroines. And in all the years he had known her it had seemed that what had been so natural to Margaret was alien to Angela.

Every detail of the room, he discovered, recalled Margaret's tastes; the music scattered on the piano was the sort she had liked; the Shelley, Maeterlinck, Heine; the red roses! Margaret's red roses—her coffin had been covered with them, her favorite flowers.

He had a half-frown for his puzzled thoughts, and it was rather as if he took her into his confidence than as an invitation of hers that he spoke, intentionally perhaps, at random:

"There's that play of Maeterlinck's we were discussing. Do you know you've defined your impressions exactly as Margaret would have done?"

With a gesture that was again a souvenir of Margaret, she opened her big black fan, and, with her eyes on his, was merely expectant.

"I couldn't," he followed, at some pains in his choice of words, "have expected you—a year ago—to have been interested, to have discussed it. You seemed apart—" He paused, and it was in a certain hush that his next words seemed to vibrate with an unaided crudeness.

"We used to take things to pieces—to tinker at our trades. I used to have the feeling—and it made me wince—that you

were in judgment on the trespass we committed—your sister and I were much of the same temperament—on the ideality of life. Well, this aloofness was a quality of yours—" He paused again, and taking up the volume of Heine on the table beside him, turned the leaves in a moment's embarrassment. "You and I," he continued, "have become so completely in touch—have entered into so much the same spirit of comradeship that Margaret and I used to share—that I know you'll appreciate the feeling I had."

He smiled with a recovery of ease.

"It's like a dream! It was beautiful to me—though you'll laugh at me—now!"

Her acquiescence lacked brightness, but he did not notice. "Would I have laughed then?"

"That's just it. I didn't think that you would have laughed then! You seemed too distant. As distant as the ideal itself! A sort of vestal lighting the lamps in the temple."

He frankly exhibited to her silence his reminiscent complexities.

"You see, I was in love with you." His voice as he touched this phase was dispassionate, and he looked considerably at a east of the Winged Victory across the room. "I know it will amuse you, for now I know you so much better! I never felt in those days that we could be the friends we are now—as Margaret and I were. It's just as if Margaret were back again—! I even have the feeling that you could personate her rôles—if you would?"

His tone questioned with a leap of eagerness, but she visibly shrank, almost shivered, with a head-shake.

"Well—if you won't—! But you could! Your acting seemed the real thing. Even your sister was deceived by it; it seemed to her, I dare say, as to me, that it was your real self. But really you simply made it your vantage-ground, and gathered microscopic impressions of *us*, just as we did of imagined problems! You tricked us as perfectly in your day-by-day rendition of yourself. If Margaret were living, she would agree with me that you surpass anything she could do—or, if she didn't agree, she would admire it immensely! It was superb!"

His tone rang sincere admiration, and

the girl, leaning forward a little, had an appearance of almost breathless receptivity to what he said.

"It took me a long time—I've just discovered," he continued to confess, "that we could meet on the same plane. Do you remember, I used to jest with you on the difference in our point of view and pretend to deplore it?"

She bent her head. "I remember."

"And you never gave me a sign! We were of the same fraternity—you and Margaret and I—but you wouldn't let us know!"

Her face had a strained intentness as if she followed with a hand on the guide-rope across a difficult plank.

"I tell you this quite as if it were a dream—for, you see, it was the unreal you—just a shadow I was pursuing. I had stored I can't tell you how many idealistic emotions to offer you when we came home this spring—!" He shrugged his shoulders with an amused laugh. "*You*, who could understand as completely as Margaret did!"

"But you—" She arranged her words like figures on a chess-board. "You admired Margaret—you—cared for her?"

He shook his head. "Admired her—yes. But I didn't love her! It was *you* I loved!"

His emphasis gave conviction, and also lightened the phrase of meaning—relegated it with remoteness to a limbo.

"Margaret was wonderful. She was a priestess of platonic sympathy! A man doesn't often have such a friendship—and to have it twice!"

He got up and took her hand warmly, firmly, in both his.

"I've been impelled to tell you—I felt it would interest you! You can't understand how I felt when I found my idea was wrong about you—that my understanding had been so completely at fault. I felt I had lost what I wanted most; it was—a tragedy, to me." His face was grave. "I had expected to find you the same person—but you were another! I couldn't at first be glad that you could give me the replica of the friendship Margaret gave. I couldn't thank you for it—I was too sore over the loss of what I'd been in love with. But I *do* appreciate it now—most fully! That is why

I've told you this little story—risked your amusement."

His smile encouraged a humorous view on her part, and then faded into seriousness.

"I want you to thoroughly know how I value your friendship. Before, there seemed no way to approach you—I was struggling always for one, trying to grope toward your solitude—your altitude. And all the time—! But you didn't understand!"

"No," she said, dully, "*I* didn't understand."

He pressed her hand in his determined tribute to what he had lately acquired, and went back to his seat.

"It's been hard," he added, "for me to tell you this. It's a curious bit of psychology. I worshipped the shadow, but the substance is, after all, the best thing in the world—friendship."

She did not speak, but her face was uninterpretative to his comprehension.

"Who wins his love shall lose her,
Who loses her shall gain—"

you remember? I never thought I should ever define it that way. I'm very fortunate. I wish you could tell me that my visits haven't bored you utterly—but they must! My dulness—!"

She roused herself. "Then *you* haven't been bored?" Her voice just failed of a quiver.

"Bored! If you knew how I shall miss them! Mother has decided we ought to go back and set her cousin at liberty. So we've very nearly arranged to leave. I go to New York to-morrow, and mother will follow in a few days. She told me to tell you she was coming to say good-by."

He rose for his own leave-taking.

"You will let me write to you? And you'll answer? Please!—I mustn't lose you—as I did the old Angela! You don't know how grateful I am for the privilege of your friendship!"

He stooped and kissed the hand he had once more taken in his, as an earnest of his protestation, or, perhaps, in the spirit of an affectionate farewell.

Angela shivered imperceptibly as his lips touched her fingers. "Good-by!" she said.

